



# The Barrier

By Rex Beach

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## CHAPTER XIV.

A MYSTERY IS UNRAVELED.

LEUTENANT BURRELL was considerably taken aback when a quarter of an hour after the young lover's ecstatic return to his quarters Gale knocked at his door, for the trader's visit, coupled with the late hour and his somber countenance, forecast new complications.

"He's here to object, but it won't go," thought the lieutenant as he made his visitor welcome.

Mende swung his big reading chair out beneath the hanging lamp and, going to the sideboard, brought back a bottle, some glasses and a pouch of tobacco. Noting the old man's sigh of fatigue as he sat himself down heavily, he remarked sympathetically:

"Mr. Gale, you've made a long trip today and you must be tired. If this talk is to be lengthy, why not have a drink with me now and postpone it until tomorrow?"

"I've been tired for eighteen years," the other replied. "Tonight I hope to get rested."

"Well, let's get at it," the younger man finally said.

"I suppose you'll want to interrupt and question me a heap, but I'll ask you to let me tell this story the way it comes to me till I get it out. Otherwise you'll want to know what all this has to do with you and Nelia. Yes; she told me about you and her, and that's why I'm here." He paused. "You really think you love her, do you?"

Burrell removed his pipe and gazed at it coolly.

"I love her so well, Mr. Gale, that nothing you can say will affect me. I hesitated at first about asking her to be my wife because—you'll appreciate the unusual—well, her unusual history. You see, I come from a country where mixed blood is about the only thing that can't be lived down or overlooked, and I've been raised with notions of family honor and pride of race and birth, and so forth, that might seem preposterous and absurd to you. But a heap of conceits like that have been bred into me from generations back. They run in the blood of every old family in my country, and so, I'm ashamed to say, I hesitated and tried to reason myself into giving her up, but I've had my eyes opened, and I see how little those things amount to, after all. I'm going to marry Nelia, Mr. Gale. I'd like to do it the day after tomorrow, Sunday, but she isn't of age yet, and if you object we'll have to wait until November, when she turns eighteen. We'd both like your consent, of course. I'd be sorry to marry her without it. But if you refuse we'll be forced to displease you." He looked up and met the father's gaze steadily.

The other man's lips framed a faint smile.

"We'll see. I wish to God I'd had your decision when I was your age. This story would be different and easier to tell." He waited a moment, then settled to his self-appointed task. "I was mining at the time up in the mother lode country of California, which was the frontier then, pretty much as this is now, only we had better things to eat. I was one of the first men into a camp named Chandon—helped to build it, in fact—and got hold of some ground that looked real good. It was hard mining, however, and, being poor, I was still gripping my drill and hammer after the town had grown up."

"A woman came out from the east—Vermont it was—and schoolteaching was her line of business, only she hadn't been raised to it, and this was her first chatter at the game. Her folks died and left her up against it. I gathered from what little she told me—sort of an old story, I guess, and usual, too, only for her. She was plumb unusual."

He seemed to ponder this a moment and then resumed:

"It don't make any difference to you how I first saw her and how I began to forget that anything else in the world was worth having but her. I'd lived in the woods all my life, as I said, and knew more about birds and bugs and bees than I did about women. I hadn't been broke proper and didn't know how to act with them, but I laid out to get this girl, and I did fairly well. There's something wild in every woman that needs to be tamed, and it isn't like the wildness that runs in wood critters. You can win that over by gentleness, but you have to take it away from a woman. Every live thing that couldn't talk was my friend, but I made the mistake of courting my mate the same way, not knowing that when two of any species mate the male must rule. I was too gentle. Even so, I reckon I'd have won out only for another man. Dan Bennett was his name—the kind that dubs animals late, and—well, that takes his measure. His range adjoined mine, and though I'd never seen him, I heard stories now and then—the sort of tales you can't tell to a good woman—so it worried me when I heard of his attentions to this girl. Still, I thought she'd surely find him out and recognize the kind of fellow he was; but, Lord, a woman can't tell a man from a dog, and there wasn't any one to warn her."

"This Bennett came from the town below, where he ran a saloon and a brace game or two; but, being as he rode into our camp and out again in the night and as I didn't drink nor listen to the music of the little rolling ball, why, we never met even after he began coming to Chandon. Understand, I wasn't too good for those amusements. I just didn't happen to hanker after them, for I was living with the image of the little school-ma'am in my mind, and that destroyed what habits I'd formed."

"It was along in the early spring that she began to see I had notions about her, but my d—d backwardness

wouldn't let me speak, and, in addition, I was getting closer to ore every shot at the mine and was holding off until I could lay both myself and my gold mine at her feet and ask her to take the two of us, so if one didn't pan out the other might. But it seemed like I'd never get into pay. The closer I got the harder I worked, and, of course, the less I saw of her, likewise the oftener Bennett came. I reckon no man ever worked like I did—two shifts a day, eighteen hours, with six to sleep. The skin came off of my hands, and I staggered when I came out into the daylight. At last I struck it, and still I waited awhile longer till I could be sure. Then I went down to my little shack and put on my other clothes. I remember I'd gone so thin that they hung loose, and my palms were so raw I had hard work handling the buttons and got my shirt all bloody, for I'd been in the drift forty hours without sleep and breathing powder smoke till my knees buckled and wobbled under me. To this day the smell of stale powder smoke makes a woman of me, but that morning I sang, for I was going for my bride, and the world was brighter than it has ever been for eighteen years. The little schoolhouse was closed, at which I remembered that the term was over. I'd been living underground for weeks and lost track of the days, so that I had to count them up on my fingers. It took me a long time, for I was pretty tired in my head, but when I'd figured it out I went on to where she was boarding.

"The woman of the place came to the door, a Scotchwoman. She had a mole on her chin, I remember, a brownish black mole with three hairs in it. She wore an apron, too, that was kind of checkered, and three buttons were open at the neck of her dress. I recall a lot more of little things about her, though the rest of what happened is rather dreamy."

"I asked for Merridy, and she told me she'd gone away—gone with Bennett; the night before, while I was coughing blood from the powder smoke; that they were married in the front room and that the bride looked beautiful. She had cried a bit on leaving Chandon and—and—that was about all. I counted the buttons on the Scotchwoman's waist eight or ten times, and by and by she asked if I was sick. But I wasn't. She was a kind hearted woman, and I'd been to her house a good deal, so she asked me to come in and rest. I wasn't tired, so I went away and climbed back up to the little shack and the mine that I hated now."

"I turned into a kind of hermit after that, and I wasn't good to associate with. Men got so they shunned me, and I knew they told strange stories, because I heard them whisper when I went to the stores for grub once a month."

"From time to time I heard of her, but the news, instead of gladdening me, as it would have gladdened some men, wrung out what bits of suffering were left in me, and I fairly ached for her. Nobody comes to see clearer than a woman deceived, so it didn't take her long to find out the kind of man Bennett was. He wasn't like her at all, and the reason he had courted her so hotly was just that he had had everything that might belong to a man like him and had sickened of it, so he wanted her because she was clean and pure and different, and, realizing that he couldn't get her any other way, he had married her. But she was a treasure no bad man could appreciate, and so he tired quickly, even before the little one came."

"When I heard that she had borne him a daughter I wrote her a letter, which took me a month to compose and which I tore up. One day a story came to me that made me saddle my horse to ride down and kill him—and, mind you, I was a man who made pets of little wild, trusting things. But I knew she would surely send for me when her pain became too great, so I uncinched my gear and hung it up and waited and waited and waited. Three long, endless years I waited, almost within sound of her voice, without a word from her, without a glimpse of her, and every hour of that time went by as slowly as if I had held my breath. Then she called to me, and I went."

"I tell you, I was thankful that day for the fortune that had made me take good care of my horse, for I rode like Death on a windstorm. I rode through the streets of Mesa, where they lived, and past the lights of Bennett's big saloon, where I heard the sound of devil's revelry and a shrill voiced woman singing—a woman the like of which he had tried to make my Merridy. I never skulked or sneaked in those days, and no man ever made me take back roads, so I came up to his house from the front and tied my horse to his gatepost. She heard me on the steps and opened the door."

"You sent for me," said I. "Where is he?" But he had gone away to a neighboring camp and wouldn't be back until morning, at which I felt the way a thief must feel, for I'd hoped to meet him in his own house. I couldn't think very clearly, however, because of the change in her. She was so thin and worn and sad—sadder than any woman I'd ever seen. I'd changed a heap myself. Anyhow that was the first thing she spoke about, and the tears came into her eyes as she breathed:

"Poor boy! You took it very hard, didn't you?"

"You sent for me," said I. "Which road did he take?"

"There's nothing you can do," she answered. "I sent to make sure that you still love me."

"Did you ever doubt it?" said I, at which she began to cry like a woman who has worn out all emotion.

"Can you feel the same after what I've made you suffer?" she said, and I

reckon she must have read the answer in my eyes, for I never was much good at talking, and the sight of her, so changed, had taken the speech out of me, leaving nothing but aches and pains and ashes in its place. When she saw what she wished to know she told me the story—the whole miserable story—that I'd heard enough of to suspect. Why she'd married the other man she couldn't explain herself, except that it was a woman's whim—I had stayed away, and he had come the oftener—part play and part the man's dare-devil fascination.

"He's a fiend," she told me. "I've stood all I can. He'll make a bad woman of me as sure as he will of the little one if I stay on here, so I have decided to go and take her with me."

"Where?" said I.

"Wherever you say," she answered, and yet I did not understand, not till I saw the look in her eyes. Then as it dawned on me she broke down, for it was a terrible thing for a good woman to offer.

"It's all for the little girl," she cried. "More than her life depends upon it. We must get her away from him."

"She saw it was her only course and went where her heart was calling."

The lieutenant met the look of appeal in the trader's eyes and nodded to imply his complete understanding and approval.

"We love some women for their goodness, others we love for their frailty, but there never was one who combined the two like her, and now

that I know she loved me I began to believe again there was a God somewhere. I'd never seen the youngster, so she led me in where it was sleeping, and I remember my boots made such a devil of a thumping on the floor that she laid her slim white finger on her lips and smiled at me. All the fingers in the world began to choke at my throat and all the blood in me commenced to pound at my heart when I looked on that little sleeping kiddie. The tears began to roll out of my eyes, and because they had been dry for four years they scalded like melted metal. That was the only time I ever wept. The sight of her baby did it."

"I love her already," I whispered, and I'll spend my life making her happy and making a lady of her, which clinched what wavering doubt the mother had, and she began to plan quickly, the fear coming on her of a sudden that our scheme might fail. I was for riding away with both of them that night, back through the streets of Mesa and up into the hills, where I'd have held them single handed against man or devil, but she wouldn't hear of it."

"We must go away," she said, "a long way from here, where the world won't find us and the little one can

grow to womanhood without knowing. She must never learn who her father was or what her mother did. We will start all over, you and I and the baby, and forget. Do you love me well enough to do it?"

"I uttered a cry and took her in my arms, the arms that had ached for her all those years. Then I kissed her for the first time."

The old man tried to light his pipe, which had gone out, but his fingers shook so that he dropped the match.

"Her plan was for me to take the youngster away that night and for her to join us later, because pursuit was certain, and three could be traced where one might disappear. She would follow when the opportunity offered. I saw that he had instilled a terror into her and that she feared him like death, but as I thought it over her scheme seemed feasible, so I agreed. I was to ride west that hour with the sleeping babe and conceal myself at a place we selected, while she would say that the little one had wandered away and been lost in the canyon or anything else to throw Bennett off. After a time she would join us. Well, the little girl never waked when I took her in my arms nor when the mother broke down again and talked to me like a crazy woman."

"I traveled hard that night and swapped horses at daylight. Then, leaving the wild country behind, I came into a region I didn't know and found a Mexican woman who tended the child for me, for I was close by the place where Merridy was to come. Every night I went into the village in hopes that some word had arrived, and I waited patiently for a week. Then I got the blow. I heard it from the loafers around the little postoffice first, but it dazed me so I wouldn't believe it till I borrowed the neighbor

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And read the whole story, with the type dancing and leaping before me, it took some hours for it to seep in even after that, and for years I recalled every word of the d—d lie as if it had been branded on me with hot irons. They called it a shocking crime, the most brutal murder California had ever known, and in the headlines was my name in letters that struck me between the eyes like a hammer. Mrs. Dan Bennett had been foully murdered by me in a fit of sudden jealousy, and I had disappeared with the baby! The husband had returned unexpectedly to find her dying, so he said, but too far gone to call for help and with barely sufficient strength to tell him who did it and how! Then the paper went on with the tale of my courting her and turning me down for Bennett. It told how I had gone off alone up into the hills, turning into a bear that nobody, man or child, could approach. It said I had brooded there a long time till the mania got uppermost and so came down to wreak my vengeance. They never even did me the credit of calling me crazy. I was a fiend incarnate, a beast without soul and a lot of things like that—and, remember, I had never harmed a live thing in all my life. However, that wasn't what hurt. What turned me into a dull, dead, suffering thing was the knowledge that she was gone. For hours I couldn't get beyond that fact. Then came the realization that Bennett had

done it, for I reasoned that he had dragged a hint of the truth from her by force of the fear he held her in—and slain her. God! The awful rage that came over me! But there was nothing to do. I had sworn to guard the little one, so I couldn't take vengeance on him. I couldn't go back and prove my innocence, for that would give the child to him.

"What a night I spent! The next day I saw I had been indicted by the grand jury and was a wanted man. From a distance I watched myself become an outlaw; watched the county put a price upon my head, which Bennett doubled; watched public opinion rise to such a heat that possum began to scour the mountains. What I noted in particular was a statement in the paper that 'the sorrowing husband takes his bereavement with the quiet courage which marks a brave man!'

It happened that the Mexican woman couldn't read and talked little. Still, I knew they'd find me soon—it couldn't be otherwise—so I made another run for it, swearing an oath, however, before I left that I'd come back and have that gambler's heart."

"It was lucky I went, for they uncovered my sign the next day, and the country where I'd hidden blazed like a field of dry grass. They were close on my heels, and they closed in from every quarter. But, psaw, I know the woods like an Indian, and the wild things were my friends again, which would have made it play if I'd been alone, but a girl child of three was harder to manage. So I covered and skulked day after day like a thief of the murderer they thought me, working always farther into the hidden places, traveling by night with the little one asleep on my bosom, by day playing with her in some leafy glen, with my pursuers so close behind that for weeks I never slept, and my love for the child increased daily till it became almost an insanity."

"We had close squeezes many times, but I finally won, in spite of the fact that they tracked us clear to the edge of the desert, for I had hit for the state line, knowing that Nevada was a wilderness and feeling that I'd surely lose them there. And I did. But in doing it I nearly lost Merridy. You see, the constant travel and hardship was too much for a prattling baby, and she fell sick from the heat, the dust and thirst."

"I was bound for the nearest ranch or camp where a woman could be found; but, as luck would have it, I went through without trying. I had gone farther from men and things, however, than I thought, and this return pursuit was a million times worse than the other, for I couldn't go fast enough to shake Death, who ran with his hand on my canteen or rode on my horse's rump. It was then I found Alluna. She was with a hunting party of Pah-Utes, who knew nothing of me nor of the white man's affairs and cared less, and when I saw the little squaw I rode my horse up beside her, laid the sick child in her arms, then tumbled out of the saddle. They had a harder job to pull me through than they did to save Merridy."

"The little one was playing around several days before I got back my reason. Meanwhile the party had moved north, taking us with them, and, as it happened, just missing a posse who were returning from the desert."

"When I was able to get about I told Alluna that I must be going, but as I told her I watched her face and saw the sign I wanted. The white girl had clutched at her like she had at me, and she couldn't give her up, so I made a dicker with her old man. It took all the money I had to buy that squaw, but I knew the kiddie must have a woman's care, and the three of us started out soon after alone and broke."

"Since then we three have never rest-

ed. I left them once in Idaho and went back to sleep, riding all the way, mostly by night, but Bennett was gone. He'd run down mighty fast after Merridy died till he had a killing in his place. Instead of stopping to face it out the yellow in him rose to the surface, and he left before sunup, as I had left, making a clean get-away, too, for there was no such hullabaloo raised about killing a man as there was about—the other. So my trip was all for nothing."

"I figured it wouldn't be right to either you or Nelia to tell you go it blind, and so I came in to tell you the whole thing and to give myself up."

Gale stopped, then poured himself another drink.

"To give yourself up?" echoed Burrell vaguely. "How do you mean?"

He had sat like one in a trance during the long recital, only his eyes alive.

"I'm under indictment for murder," said the trader. "I have been for fifteen years, and there's no chance in the world for me to prove my innocence."

"Have you told Nelia?" the young man inquired.

"No; you'll have to do that. I never could. She might disbelieve. What's more, you mustn't tell her yet. Wait till I give the word."

"John Gale," said the Lieutenant, "you're the bravest man I ever knew and the best." He choked a bit. "You sacrificed all that life meant when this girl was a baby, and now when she has come into womanhood you give up your blood for her. By all that's great, you are a man! I want your hand!"

Then he inquired irrelevantly: "But what about Bennett, Mr. Gale? You say you never found him?"

The trader answered after a moment's hesitation, "He is still at large," at which his companion exclaimed, "I'd love to meet him in your stead!"

Gale seemed seized with a desire to speak, but even while he hesitated out of the silent night there came the sound of quick footsteps approaching briskly, as if the owner were in haste and knew whether he was bound.

"Lieutenant Burrell," a gruff voice cried, "Let me in! Quick! I've got work for you to do! Open up! This is Ben Stark!"

[To be continued.]

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